ST CLAIR FAMILY

Eli St. Clair Served as Vigo Area Well Digger

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By DOROTHY J. CLARK

It never fails to happen when one is digging up local history that as soon as the word gets around that a certain item or bit of information is needed, helpful people begin sending or bringing it in. Three years ago I was researchng the St. Clair family and more information is still coming in.

Eli St. Clair attained his 97th birthday on March 27, 1891, according to the old newspaper clipping I received, and quietly celebrated the event with his family and friends at the home of his daughter, Mrs. Mary Smock, who lived on the historic site known as Fort Harrison.

Born in 1794 in Sussex County, Delaware, Mr. St. Clair had only a faint recollection of his parents. His father served in the Revolutionary War and moved his family to Pennsylvania on the banks of the Monongahela river when Eli was less than a year old.

Soon the family began the long journey to Kentucky, settling at Hardensburg when Eli was six years old. In 1812 he married Miss Fannie Siner who was not quite 15 years old, the daughter of Benjamin and Polly (Maladay) Siner. The marriage license of Breckinridge County, Ky., gives his name as Eli Simpler, and in other records there are other spellings such as Sinclair, Sinklear, Sinkler.

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With two babies, Eli and Fannie decided to leave Kentucky and move to Indiana where they settled first in Sullivan County near Carlisle.

In 1838 Eli St. Clair and his family of 12 children (Lavina, born 1814; Polly, born 1816; Nelson, born 1818; Benjamin, born 1819; Andrew Jackson, born 1820; Ellender Jane, born 1822; Cynthis Eveline, born 1823-4; Emily Maria, born 1825-6; William James, born 1827; Clemsey Curry, born 1829; Richard Lane, born 1830; and John Martin, born 1832) came to Terre Haute and stayed for awhile in "Old Johnny" Burton's log cabin which was later the site of the well in Woodlawn Cemetery.

New Orleans, disposed of it for one thousand dollars in a solid chunk of gold. He placed the gold in a sack, sewed the sack to his shirt, and it was never seen from the time it was given him until he turned it over to Johnston.

During his stay in Sullivan County the Indians were very troublesome, and St. Clair could tell some terrifying tales. He accompanied Col. Ledgerwood to Chicago on foot and they had the honor of nailing down the floor in the first courthouse there. It seems the workmen walked off the job when the building was nearly finished and would not return. The planks were all dressed and stacked in the house when Col. Ledgerwood secured the contract and the two men put down the floor.

During his residence in Terre Haute he had watched it grow up into a large city, had seen the cornfields and woods disappear to make room for buildings. Making a living digging wells was a dangerous occupation in those early days and the old gentleman carried scars to prove it.

His wife died in 1862, one son was drowned in 1840, and his other children lived until 1886 when one by one they

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passed away. In 1891 on his birthday he still had seven children living and more grandchildren, etc. than he could begin to name. He died April 6, 1892, at age 98 years.

From one of his descendants, Maud Russell of California, came her memories of Aunt Polly Smock's house at Fort Harrison and the time she spent as a child playing on the banks of the Wabash river in front of the house.

The Wabash was "big and wonderful. I would stay so long down there playing with the rocks and toads that she would send someone down to see if I was drowned yet. I always took some of the rocks home with me to Illinois, but not the toads. How the world does change and all of us with it. However, I heard someone say on the radio, 'The past is only a memory away.'"

The place was not used as a burying ground then. The original cemetery was directly south of the house. It was not the most cheerful spot in world to live, next door to a graveyard, but the St. Clair family was made of stern stuff and gave no heed to the gloomy white tombs within a stone's throw of their door.

After living in Terre Haute for several years, Eli, his wife and several of his children moved to Minnesota and commenced farming. As he was the first settler in that area, it was called St. Clair's Bluff. Becoming dissatisfied the St. Clair family returned to Vigo County and settled in Honey Creek Twp.

Flatboat Pilot

During his nearly a century of life, St. Clair had been a farmer, carpenter, river pilot and well digger. During the early days he had been a flatboat pilot between Terre Haute and New Orleans making between 50 and 60 trips down the Wabash and back.

Engaged by Jim Johnston, a store keeper on Main Street, he took the cargo to